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NINE-AND-FIFTY JAWNS

Michael Deagler

NINE-AND-FIFTY. This is a story about a strangler. An as-of-yet-unapprehended strangler. A real lady-throttling S.O.B. The Kensington Strangler, he's called, to differentiate him from other Philadelphia stranglers. He's out there right now, prowling those Kensington streets, strangling jawns to death even as we sit here. Out there where it's night, where there's often rain. What do you think of that, you reader? Hello, by the way.

EIGHT-AND-FIFTY. You know **jawn** (/dʒɔn/), a Philadelphia colloquialism. Fundamentally, a noun. It may describe any person, place, or jawn. One might say, *The brown jawn jumped over the lazy jawn*. One might say, *A red jawn glazed with rain jawn by the white jawns*. For example.

SEVEN-AND-FIFTY. One might ask, justly, *Who would say rain jawn instead of rainwater?* One might ask, testily, *Yo, what the fuck do you mean lazy jawn?* I've got you, reader.

SIX-AND-FIFTY. One might say, of these Kensington days, *These are strangled jawns. The breezes stifle. The skies bruise earlier: blue to black-and-blue to purpled-sulfurous-gray. There are more silences than there used to be. We keep encountering them in our speech. It is more clipped, vaguer, less committal. We talk about the weather, but not honestly. The air is translucent. The rain pounds for hours or lingers for days as a dense fog. We make less eye contact. We are always coming or going, just leaving or about to arrive. Whatever season this is, we are somewhere in the bowels of it. Something is throttling our days, squeezing us to muffled night*. For example.

FIVE-AND-FIFTY. The first woman was young, twenty-one, a nursing student at one point, found in a lot on Malta Street. Half-naked among the weeds, the high rushes, broken bottles, refuse, debris. She lasted thirty days, the stretch right before all this. One final clean month. Maybe she rose early that morning, made coffee, saw the new light in her patch of sky. Maybe she thought it was transcendent. Maybe she thought it was shit. Anyway, she must have figured that she had a few rounds left in her. So she was back out on the stroll, the El rattling above like coins in a dryer, a client on foot, a jaunt and business conversation.

Who can know at what point she realized that it wasn't going right? Who ever really knows when it's their last time out?

FOUR-AND-FIFTY. But you know **Kensington** (/kɛnz ɪŋ tən/). It's one of those jawns short on sky. Heavy on streets, though. The streets are first, then the sidewalks, and above them the stoops, and then houses rising up from the stoops, red brick, two or three stories, with doors that are open or shut and windows that are alternatively light or dark, and these have roofs, and above the roofs is the elevated railway where the trains quake from somewhere south to another place north of here. The EI is physically above Front Street, then the Avenue, then Frankford, only. But the quake, the quake hangs over everywhere, a canopy between the roofs and whatever's on the other side of that.

THREE-AND-FIFTY. It's worth a visit, is what I'm saying.

TWO-AND-FIFTY. Poe said of Kensington, "[It is] a most wild and most homely place, composed of shabby, modest mews and houses, populated by coarse, violent men and cruel women, and nurturing of all shades of vice and dissipation."

ONE-AND-FIFTY. Dickens said of Kensington, "Oh, fuck that jaun [sic]."

FIFTY. Compare jawn to **joint** (/dʒɔɪnt/), a New York colloquialism. Also a noun: a person, a place, or a thing. Often a criminalized thing. Or a criminalized place, or a place for criminalized people. In contemporary speech, a project or a sample of one's work: a *Spike Lee joint*, for example, in which joint refers to a film. Or in mechanics, a *universal joint*, which, I assume, refers to Existence.

NINE-AND-FORTY. One might say, of these Kensington joints, *There's a joint for chicken. A joint for Chinese. A corner joint for beer and malt liquor. A state joint for vodka and table wine. There are cat joints and card joints, front joints and trap joints. Joints to take a girl. Joints to take a vial. Joints to spend a weekend away from the babel and the bedlam. Charter joints for the kids. Convalescent joints for the old folks. Churchy joints where the living get saved. Clinical joints where the dying get trucked. Mortuary joints where the dead get washed. Monument joints where the dead get remembered. Vacant joints where the dead get forgotten.*

EIGHT-AND-FORTY. What are the people like? What sort of people are they? I know what you want to know. It's actually very mixed. One of the most mixed neighborhoods in all Philadelphia, racially and linguistically. Just not economically. They're all way poor, and they wouldn't like you. Know that: Kensington would

hate your jaw'n. I can tell.

SEVEN-AND-FORTY. But I would hate to give you the wrong impression about Kensington. Kensington isn't that bad east of Frankford Avenue, though people will tell you that east of Frankford isn't really Kensington. Kensington proper starts at Frankford and it's not as dangerous as you've been led to believe. You're fine to walk around so long as you know where you can walk around. It isn't too hairy until you get west of Kensington Avenue, which is West Kensington, which gets a bad rap but also isn't really even all that hairy, not if you're familiar with it. You're essentially fine until Front Street, and west of Front it isn't even Kensington anymore. You've made it straight through. You're in Fairhill then, which, relatively, isn't even all that bad at all.

SIX-AND-FORTY. I only tell you these things because I'm concerned for your safety. There's a strangler out there, for Christ's sake, and I think you're losing sight of that. We're all immortal until we're not, you know. We're all pearls before jawns. All jawns before the slaughter. I'm not trying to scare you. I'm just trying to warn you. I don't want you scared. I certainly don't want that.

FIVE-AND-FORTY. The second woman was thirty-five, most recently a housekeeper, also half-naked, found in a smaller lot on Weymouth Street. She had four children and a heroin habit. She likely had other interests as well, though if I had to guess I'd say they were probably starting to fall by the wayside. She would have been more careful, one would think, after hearing about the first, but there are horror stories every day up and down the Avenue, and so many alleys that dead-end it's a miracle that anyone wakes up in the morning, and if something's out for you it'll find you easily enough, and today is today, and the hour is the hour, and right now is already gone.

FOUR-AND-FORTY. Whoa. Did you feel that? That's the kind of jaw'n I'm talking about.

THREE-AND-FORTY. One might say, of these Kensington days, *Our jawns have become macabre. The women say they fear the rape more than the strangulation. They would prefer simple strangulation. Well who wouldn't? the men say. The women say that the men do not understand because they are men. The women say that the men don't have to worry about these things. The men say that they worry about plenty. That they make up most of the murdered and most of the murderers, as far as those things go. The men say that this is stressful. The women tell them that they are being ridiculous. Pauses are pregnant, looks significant. We*

duck out early, get to wherever we are going sooner.

TWO-AND-FORTY. Jane Jacobs said, regarding safety, “If a city’s jawns are safe from barbarism and fear, the city is thereby tolerably safe from barbarism and fear. When people say that a city, or part of it, is dangerous, or is a jungle, what they mean primarily is that they do not feel safe near its jawns.”

ONE-AND-FORTY. Compare jawn to **jaunt** (/dʒɒnt/), a colloquialism of the Mid-Atlantic region. Traditionally, a short excursion for pleasure. Or any excursion, all pleasure aside. An adventure with low stakes. A fuckabout. A story. Or an anecdote, at the very least. In contemporary speech, too, a catch-all jawn.

FORTY. Sometimes you will encounter the verb **jaunty** (/ˈdʒɒn ti/). Sometimes it refers to an easiness in manner or bearing. Sometimes it refers to nonsense, frivolity, or bullshit. Sometimes you will encounter the phrase *a jaunty cap*, in which case both meanings are relevant.

NINE-AND-THIRTY. Some facial composite renderings of the strangler feature him wearing a jaunty cap, which might cause a concerned citizen to wonder if some distasteful joke isn’t being played on all of us. Or maybe the strangler is simply of the gentrifying set.

EIGHT-AND-THIRTY. You know the gentrifying set, reader. Admit it: you’re a member of the gentrifying set. Am I correct? It’s okay. I’ll admit it about myself. I’m a member of the gentrifying set. There’s nothing wrong with that. We’re all gentrifying somebody, at some level. I mean, didn’t we all technically gentrify the Indians out of America?

SEVEN-AND-THIRTY. I was lying. I’m in no way affiliated with the gentrifying set. I’m an original jawn. Original as black cherry wishniak and sin.

SIX-AND-THIRTY. Here is a fable to illustrate the ignorance of the gentrifying set: A middle-aged man bums a cigarette from a young man in the parking lot of a bodega. “Are you from around here?” asks the middle-aged man. “No,” says the young man, “I’m new.” “You should be careful around here,” says the middle-aged man, “This is a hard neighborhood.” “It seems all right,” says the young man. “I grew up around here,” says the middle-aged man, “This is a hard neighborhood. I know at least ten guys I grew up with who killed themselves.” “They killed themselves?” asks the young man, “They weren’t murdered, or died from drug use?” “No, they killed themselves,” says the middle-aged man, “Purposefully.”

"Why did they kill themselves?" asks the young man, "Why didn't they just move?" "Why didn't they move?" laughs the middle-aged man, "I'll tell you for another smoke."

FIVE-AND-THIRTY. I really hate to have to illustrate my point with a fable. It feels too much like a card trick. I feel as though I'm obliged to pull a moral out of your ear at the end of it. I hope you aren't dissatisfied. Morals are one thing that I dislike about fables. Jaunts, on the other hand, tend to be morally ambiguous. That's one thing that I like about jaunts.

FOUR-AND-THIRTY. One might say, of these Kensington jaunts, *Yo, I've got jaunts, friend. Jaunts for days. Jaunts for years. I've got jaunts from all over Kensington. I've got Fishtown jaunts, too, I've got Port Richmond jaunts. I've got a Northern Liberties jaunt. I've got a jaunt in Camden, New Jersey, friend. I've got murder jaunts, thievery jaunts, epiphanous jaunts about art and self-expression. My jaunts are urban realism, friend. My jaunts are about the modern human condition, friend. I've got these jaunts for decades.*

THREE-AND-THIRTY. The third woman was twenty-seven and something of a career offender. She wasn't local. From somewhere in the Poconos, though they don't have a current address. She spent time in Virginia and New York, spent time for possession, for theft. Had a tattoo for her daughter, though they can't find the kid. They can't find anyone for her anywhere. Why Philadelphia? Why Kensington? Why Wednesday, why Rorer Street, why this jawns of all the jawns? There probably aren't answers. Not meaningful ones, anyway. She might have said she was led there by something deep inside of herself that she didn't quite understand. She might have said nothing at all. Some animals just want to find somewhere quiet to die.

TWO-AND-THIRTY. Which isn't to say that she was an animal, or that she wanted to die. No more than any of us are, or than any of us do.

ONE-AND-THIRTY. But we all are and all will, reader, and you should pray against a public death. God forbid whatever kills you becomes newsworthy. It's bad enough to be a cautionary tale for you nieces and nephews, but imagine becoming a figure in a sensationalized media narrative. Or even simply to be known best for the unusual way you went out. They say they'll remember you for your sense of humor, but you know how it goes.

THIRTY. Here is a fable about mourning: Two women trudge along Tulip Street,

wilted, foraging in the gutter for cigarette butts. “What a day,” they say, and “Thank God it isn’t raining.” The sun is out somewhere. In front of a steak shop are a boy and a dog. They stop to pet the dog. “What’s his name?” they ask the boy. “It’s not my jawn,” says the boy, “A man asked me to watch it a minute.” The dog keeps his thoughts to himself, squinting at the women. One begins to cry. “I’m sorry,” says the other, “There’s been a death in the family.” She finds a butt in a crack in the pavement and lights it for her sister. “There’s been a death in the family,” she repeats, “That’s why we’re out looking for cigarettes.”

NINE-AND-TWENTY. There is a discernable etymological lineage that runs from **joint** to **jaunt** to **jawn**. If I can just make a linguistic point right here. That lineage is marked by a vowel shift followed by the apocope of /t/. The word broadens, phonetically and semantically. “oint” is exact. “aunt” is general. “awn” contains multitudes.

EIGHT-AND-TWENTY. A criticism, should any exist, to be leveled against the word jawn, might conceivably be that, though the word is encompassing and accommodating and flexible beyond all realistic demand, it is not, perhaps, ideal in cases requiring precision.

SEVEN-AND-TWENTY. Precision. Is precision something you want, reader? I said **strangler**

(/’**stræŋ**glər/) up at the top. That’s the word you need to know. Don’t worry so much about these others. I recognize that they are distracting, and I would remove them if I could, but all of them are in service of precision. This jawn is all about precision.

SIX-AND-TWENTY. Yet there are always unknowns.

FIVE-AND-TWENTY. They pulled a woman from the river way down past the navy yard. They don’t know where she slipped in. The marks on her throat say she was dead before the waters accepted her, whirled her, kneaded her tired skin. They rolled together, redeemed, this woman and the Delaware, past Camden and Gloucester City and empty unnamed marshland, toward salvation, maybe, toward somewhere. So what does that mean?

FOUR-AND-TWENTY. Father Divine said of definition (he was speaking of God), “It is jawnified and jawnilized. It is rejaawnified and rejaawnilized. It rejaawnilizes and it rejaawnilates. It rejaawnilates and is rejaawnilizatable. It rejaawnificates and rejaawnifitizes.”

THREE-AND-TWENTY. What is problematic is the imprecision of all language. What is problematic is that one man's this is another man's that. I told you what a *jawn* is, but you already knew. You knew more deeply than I could ever describe it to you.

TWO-AND-TWENTY. For real though, you have no idea. Not about this jawn. This, right here, is my jawn.

ONE-AND-TWENTY. Not victims of the strangler: two instances of ligature strangulation (one woman, twenty-eight, fully dressed, with an extension cord, found in a car near Harrowgate Park; one man, thirty-six, fully dressed, with a length of wire, found in an apartment in the Coral Street Arts House.) One boy, seventeen, fully naked, manual strangulation, in an abandoned row home in Juniata. One man, fifty-three, naked from the waist down, hanging from a beam in a basement on Tioga Street with a belt around his neck. The gunshot victims. And all the other dead people, too.

TWENTY. Precision is likewise a difficulty in belief. The world introduces complications for which the theological mind can never fully plan. That is why we find such simultaneity in faith: that God can be made man, that man can be made jawn, that jawn can be made spirit manifested in the form of a dove or a heavenly steed or an angel the reaps the souls of children. Everything is everywhere, reader, can be anything, anywhere. It doesn't mean you're ever safe (you're not!), but you're always accounted for. So there's that.

NINE-AND-TEN. But really we can't know anything. I'm not sure I'd want to. Ignorance leaves much to the imagination.

EIGHT-AND-TEN. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen said of *jawn*, "Jawn cannot mean life. Jawn cannot mean death. Jawn cannot mean love. Jawn cannot mean God. Jawn can only describe what is physical. Jawn can only describe what is temporal. We must extricate ourselves from this prison of jawns."

SEVEN-AND-TEN. An interesting thing about Kensington is that no one is planning on staying there. Not even the gentrifying set, who tend to view Kensington as a step stone neighborhood on the way to somewhere else. Everybody's got a somewhere else. Even lifers, born and bred, seem always mere days away from packing up, finally getting out to Bucks County, to Bristol or Croydon or Fairless Hills. Enough is enough is enough, after all.

SIX-AND-TEN. But no one ever leaves. Listen for a moment to one of God's children out on the Avenue, and realize that all of human aspiration is simply a form of defensive psychosis. A plan provides order in a chaotic universe. Tonight is just the anteroom to tomorrow. This world is just the vestibule of the next.

FIVE-AND-TEN. One might say, of these Kensington days, *Stranglers, rapists, assorted sociopathic jawns, they generally pick one type of person to go after, we're told. They have preferences, like anyone. Our strangler, though, killed a white woman, a black woman, and a brown woman. And he might be a white man, a black man, or a brown man. We can't know. Our jawn is post-racial, we say. He's not constrained by prejudices of the past. Ours is a strangler for the new century.*

FOUR-AND-TEN. But can we talk conceits for a moment? The structural conceit of this joint rests on the punning of the words **jawn** (/dʒɔn/) and **swan** (/swan/). It's an off-rhyme. I could tell you that those words rhyme in the Philadelphia accent, but that would be a lie.

THREE-AND-TEN. Chomsky said, "There are no true rhymes in the Philadelphia accent. The vowels are too numerous and mercurial. A Philadelphian never makes the same sound twice."

TWO-AND-TEN. Pound said, "Philadelphia will produce no great poets."

ONE-AND-TEN. My point is, sometimes an idea gets away from you. Sometimes you let it go. I dropped a jawn on the street the other week and watched it blow away. I did not chase it. I had others. I had, I have, a fuckload of jawns.

TEN. One last thing about the dead women, though. They were all prostitutes, the newspapers say. The nursing student, the maid, the woman from the Poconos, the woman in the river, even. For a time. They also did other things, certainly. But who wants to be defined by their occupation? You, reader, with that shit that you do? And yes they had addictions, but who of us does not? What we should say is, "We are all prostitutes," though it may sound trite and is not, in fact, true. But say it anyway. Hookers and trollops and harlots and whores, under the EI, under a brilliant, endless sky. Prostitutes, though always among other things.

NINE. I also wanted to get to the air hunger, before this is over. That's what they call it, right at the end. The victim can be conscious or not. In the case of an overdose, or even sleep apnea, it can come in while you're out. It's peaceful

enough that way. But if you're awake, in the case of drowning, say, it can be quite horrific. It's relatively quick, but you are in a state of mortal terror. Panic sets in, of course. The heart rate rises. Limbs get thrown about, nails dug into flesh, an animal convulsion twists to free the body. Keep stiff. Do not go limp. Do not let yourself drown in Kensington.

EIGHT. But the thing that gets me, reader, is that he won't let you scream. He robs you of your voice, keeps it muffled and silent down in your throat, right next to your fear. Fear does not live in the mind, I don't think, or in the heart, or the gut, or the spleen. It hangs out right above your clavicle, right at the base your fragile, lovely neck. It's a real design flaw, if you ask me.

SEVEN. Silence. That's the thing, isn't it? The most terrible thing.

SIX. Where are you reading this? Are you at work? Because that might be him in the parking lot. Are you on a train? Because that's probably him at the end of the car. Tell me you're not at home, reader, in bed, with the night right on the other side of the window? He lives out there in the night, you know. Him and all his nighttime jawns.

FIVE. St. Katharine Drexel said, "My sweetest Joy is to be in the presence of Death. I beg that when obliged to withdraw in body, I leave my Fear as a heap at the feet of Death, and my Voice as a draft at the ear of Death, and my Heart before the Blessed Sacrament of our Lord."

FOUR. Of course, she lived up in Bensalem.

THREE. One might say, of these Kensington jawns, *These jawns are fucked. These jawns are cracked-out, busted, worthless, wretched. These jawns are damaged, dopesick, fear-soaked, writhing on the pavement like rain-drowned worms. These jawns are loathsome, lowdown, high-stakes, coke-mad, life-eyed, life-hungry familiars of death. These jawns are friendless, too-fucked, too-poor, God-fearing, God-loving, God-ambivalent children of women. These jawns are itch-scratching, nail-biting, teeth-gnashing night monsters, kid-having, dead-brother, need-to-call-my-mother mourners. These jawns are Hey-Mister, spare-a-dollar, hear-my-story, take-my-picture, know-me, I-was-here, I-lived-on-the-Earth strangers. These jawns are last-joint, final-jaut, something's-got-my-name, someone's-got-my-number, all-I-hear-is-quake and all-I-know-is-after-he-gets-me-he'll-take-you-next and bless you.*

TWO. And a few of these jawns are swans.

ONE. For real, though.

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Michael Deagler lives in Philadelphia. His fiction is featured or forthcoming in *Glimmer Train*, *B O D Y*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Buffalo Almanack*, and elsewhere. More at www.michaeldeagler.com.